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ABSTRACT

Many parents find that the daily stress of coping with the demanding realities of their work lives leaves them with little personal and family time; playing with their children may therefore fall to the bottom of the "to-do list." One of the tasks of early childhood professionals thus becomes helping parents understand the nature and value of play and guiding them toward an appreciation of how playful parent-child interactions may assist parents in reaching their own goals. This paper provides information for early childhood professionals to use toward that end. The paper discusses the role of play as: (1) part of a time management strategy to build relationships with their children, encouraging their success and their health--thereby meeting long-term goals; (2) reducing stress for parents and children; (3) facilitating school readiness; (4) nurturing communication skills that are part of emotional intelligence; (5) providing an avenue for emotional expression; (6) nourishing to the parent-child relationship; and (7) providing the basis for positive discipline, preventing power struggles. The paper concludes that by providing a forum for exploring ways to fit play into found time, early childhood professionals can help parents plan home environments to encourage play and realize how play can smooth rough spots in routines. (KB)

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Child's Play: A Work-Family Issue

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Today's parents are under a great deal of stress: financial, social and emotional. Many parents hold multiple jobs both inside and outside of the home. These may take the form of wage earning positions, pursuing an education or caring for older family members. Juggling these often conflicting roles and responsibilities can create layers of complex and mixed emotions. While there are many satisfactions that are derived from successfully steering through the shoals of these challenges, the daily stress of coping with the demanding realities of contemporary life often leaves individuals with a sense that time, itself, is in short supply. This is particularly true of personal and family time, or time to devote to discretionary or luxury activities.

For many adults, playing with children is considered a frivolous activity that falls at the very bottom of their "to-do list." It is viewed more as a waste of time than as a luxury item. Others are uneasy with engaging in a light hearted egalitarian activity with their children. Playing with children does not automatically fall into the role expectations of parents. In some cultures, this is an activity for grandparents or older siblings and not part of the parental job description. Other adults may view any type of non-reality based activity as suspect. Thus, the tasks of the early childhood professional becomes not only to help parents understand the nature and value of play for children but also to guide parents towards an appreciation of how playful parent-child interactions may assist parents in reaching their own goals.

Play and Time Management

Most parents have short term and long term goals for themselves and their families, even when these are not put into words. Getting to work on time, having dinner ready, making sure there are clean clothes to wear, shopping are all examples of short term, everyday goals. Building close relationships with family members, advancing at work or in school, having

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successful children, staying healthy can be thought of as long term goals. The daily activities influence whether these goals will be reached but success or failure can not be measured on an hourly or daily basis. Time management skills are necessary in order to accomplish the myriad of chores that fill a day and to reach many of life's goals. Play is a way of harvesting short stretches of time that are caught between appointments, and chores (short term goals) and devoting that time to building relationships, encouraging children's success, and staying healthy (long term goals).Thinking about play in these terms can help parents to understand their own priorities.

Play and Stress Reduction

Playing with young children can lead to better long term health outcomes for parent and child through increased physical activity, and relaxation. It can also eliminate some of the sources of stress. Active play with young children can be physically demanding. It is a form of exercise for both adults and children. Active play with children can provide significant physical exertion that can substitute for some portion of a non-child related exercise routine. Participation in physical activity itself can relieve stress.

Entering the play frame means removing oneself from reality, even if it is only for a short time. This is one type of relaxation technique. Since children are the leaders in play, adults can and should set aside their control mode while playing with children. Following the child's lead is an important aspect of parent child play. The opportunity to allow oneself to be in the moment can also alleviate stress for adults. Becoming one with an activity is the hallmark of the flow experience. Children experience this through play and exploration. Adults recognize that they have experienced "flow" during special moments at work. Athletes speak of this sensation as "being in the zone"(Goleman, 1994). It is a period when the person is performing at the peak of her/his abilities. In this condition, mental time is as long as needed for the task at hand even though events may pass in fractions of minutes. Most people who experience "flow" find that entering this state is intrinsically rewarding (Csikszentmihali. 1990) even exhilarating.

Play and School Readiness

Doing an activity for its own sake is an inherent aspect of play. Intrinsic rewards are powerful motivators for learning. Exploration and play blend together as self selected activities with few externally imposed rules. These intrinsically motivated behaviors viewed by the participants, child or adult as

fun, can be the foundation of physical, logical-mathematical, social and emotional learning.

Parents are concerned that their young children enter school prepared for success. However, they may not see the connection between children's actions in play and the knowledge, skills and dispositions that children need to be successful in school settings. It can be helpful to illustrate the range of things that children learn through play. Besides the physical coordination of large and small muscles and the development of eye hand coordination, children learn the concepts that provide the basis for learning language. Concepts such as inside and outside, in front and behind, over and under, big and little are ideas that first gain meaning through concrete play experiences. The play context provides the experiences for learning the proprieties of the physical world that form the basis for understanding mathematical and scientific concepts such as equivalences, constancies, classification, seriation, the relationship of cause and effect and the technology of simple machines. Children need multiple encounters with objects and people in order to create the foundation for adult thinking involving abstract concepts and logic. When children begin to let one object stand for or represent another, they are on their way to developing abstract thinking. These transformations are the ear marks of pretend.

Play and Communication

Through make-believe or pretend, children also work on social and emotional issues that are part of the nurturing of emotional intelligence. They gain a better understanding of social roles and practice the language patterns and vocabularies of these positions. Trying on and trying out different roles enables children to acquire a better understanding of how others feel, think and act. Socially appropriate communications are frequently practiced within the play context. As children learn to read the non-verbal and verbal signals that distinguish the play context from reality, they are learning subtle communication skills. Adults, too, may gain a new perspective on their child's experiences by listening to the images and dialogue that the child uses in play.

By the time that adults become parents, many of them have lost the ability to relax into a play mode. When parents have difficulty understanding the value of play in their own lives, it is even more difficult for them to understand the value of play in the lives of children. Unlike adults who carry the seriousness of the world on their shoulder, children, particularly young

children are almost always willing to approach the world in the spirit of play. Indeed for young children, the combination of exploration and play may be the best recipe for learning. Through exploration children find out what objects do, what places contain, how people act. In play, children practice skills, put together ideas, and try to make sense out of their experiences. To an interested and willing adult, children's play can provide a window on the emotional and cognitive issues that are upper most in the child's mind. Play is a powerful form of communication.

Play and Emotional Expression

Children do not always have the words to express their feelings. Make believe can be used to reflect on situations that are confusing. In play, one can change the outcome of events and repeat events until they are understood. During play, children can be the person in control rather than the one who has things happen to him/her. This is one way in which play can provide an outlet for strong emotions. While sharing a play experience, parents can help children understand their own emotions. They can also suggest alternatives to play scenarios that may help children in active problems solving. Play settings may be used to anticipate experiences, such as a parent having to leave on a business trip or a relative coming to visit for an extended stay. Even after these events have passes, children will find it helpful to repeat versions of the experience within play narratives.

Parents want their children to feel positive about themselves, to have a sense of self esteem. This sense of competence comes from knowing how to do things, and having the experience of successfully meeting challenges. In play, children experience success because they can be the ones creating the goals. They can feel competent because they control the increases in complexity.and risk taking

Play and Relationships

Although parents often assert the importance of their relationship with their children, they frequently do not fully appreciate the different ways to nourish this relationship. Even when adults spend hours each day with their children, they may only spend a small fraction of the time in touch with the messages of the child's world and thoughts. Shared play builds relationships. Spending time in the child's world of play tells the child how important and valued she/he is. Within this world, parents can learn about the their child's interest and skills. This can be a starting point for expanding understanding

and increasing attention span.

Families create there own short hand for communication built from shared experiences. At there best, these intimate communication sequences hold memories of happy times and convey a sense of security and stability. Transitional times of greeting, and leave taking, even saying good night offer opportunities for crafting personal ways to express caring and love. Playful exchanges can be the starting point for family rituals.

Play and Positive Discipline

Play helps children remember past events and plan for future activities.. Preparing the child for events ahead of time and exploring past events through play can minimize or avoid the need to teach through punishment. Parents can learn to read the non-verbal behavior of their child. This will enable them to prevent conflicts rather that react to them. For example, recognizing a child's need for physical and noisy activity through shared play can enable both parent and child to better appreciate quiet time together.

Adopting a playful approach with children can often prevent the need for interpersonal confrontation and power struggles. This reduces a frequent source of stress. Recognizing confrontational "hot spots" such as dinner hour, dressing in the morning or bedtime can be a first step to switching to a playful strategy. Using pretend, humor or songs to add variety to chores can make these activities move more quickly for both parent and child. This can also provide young children with models of useful ways to get through boring or onerous tasks. Young children have difficulty waiting on lines, or in offices. Joining with them in play during these times can frequently keep them from acting in ways that could be construed as disobedient. Young children are just beginning to learn the rules of public places. Appreciating the child's needs at these moments may require careful attention not only to the child's words but also to their non-verbal behavior. This involves a process of active listening. Young children may have difficulty postponing gratification. Adults can create the supports that help them to wait for desired activities or assist them in complying with the expectations of the social environment to "stand still" or "sit quietly." One of the time honored strategies for waiting or delaying gratification is to fill that time with another interesting activity. Engaging children in playful conversation by employing rhyming or silly words, changing the, tone of voice, introducing word games, reciting songs, poems or rhymes and asking the child to suggest variation or exploring story narratives can be attempted without any additional objects or

props. Alternatively, adults may suggest ways to use ordinary objects in unconventional ways, pretend with pocket toys or offer unusual variations to an ongoing activity in order to assist the child in meeting other performance expectations. Although these tactics require both imagination and planning, they also build skill sets that are transferable to interactions with other adults including flexible thinking, active listening, and understanding alternative perspectives. They need to be undertaken in the spirit of negotiation where the goal is to have all participants winners, rather than envisioning the process as one in which one person , generally the child, is subdued or made to behave. Unfortunately, many adults are only accustom to thinking in terms of this traditional "win-lose" scenario both at home and in the workplace. Part of the art of using play as an interpersonal resource is recognizing when playful alternatives can be used to circumvent direct confrontation: Play can help defuse a tense situation.

Changing the direction of a child's activity can be accomplished from inside the play frame. Young children immersed in a pretend role are at times loath to exit from play. However, they may be coaxed to care for real needs when adults respect the gentle fiction of their play world. The three year old fire fighter or dragon slayer may not want to relinquish his costume but may agree that his pretend character may need to eat a real lunch. Even groups of children will respond to requests made within the boundaries of a play narrative. Although "wild circus animals" may be stretching the boundaries of appropriate behavior, they may respond better to requests from the circus ring master to return to their cages than to a teacher or parental command to stop running around. Adult analysis of their own primary goals or behavioral requirements are prerequisites for choosing alternative methods for redirecting activities.

Young children prefer to play within easy access of important adults. Providing activity pockets of safe and appropriate manipulative and toys in high adult use areas offers child oriented options for play in place of verbal and physical reprimands. Accepting alternative pathways to accomplish adult household chores that make adjustments for children's needs and skills provides additional opportunities for weaving together play, communication and task completion. For example, young children can sort socks and other laundry. They can also play basket toss or find the matching color at the same time. Using a light tone of voice to communicate with young children during such busy times can help them feel included. They will then not need to resort to disruptive activities to capture parental attention. Adult planning and preparation are key stones to scaffolding children's positive behavior.

Parents as play partners need time, space, and materials. Information about play can be incorporated into diverse parent education topics from safety issues, to discipline, to bedtime rituals and shared responsibilities. over household tasks. In addition to concrete suggestions for activities that highlight the learning inherent in play, parents may need strategies to help them switch from a leader to a follower that allow them to participant in their child's play world. Early childhood professionals can assit adults by helping them understand how their own needs are related to the play needs of their children. By providing a forum for exploring ways to fit play into "found time", early childhood professionals can help parents plan home environments to encourage play and realize how play can smooth rough spots in routines. While discussing the value of play and humor within the context of building closer family ties and creating family rituals, parents and other adults can be eased into seeing the role of play and relaxation for their own lives. Sometimes, adults need to give themselves permission to remember how to play.